

# **2008 Annual Report**

## ***INTRODUCTION***

2008 was a year of many milestones for the Tompkins County Board of Elections. In the midst of three major elections, five village elections and a special legislature election, we complied with federal court orders and deployed two completely different voting systems. We purchased 45 new voting machines, opened a new voting machine maintenance facility, and saw a record turnout for a Presidential Primary and a General Election. We also had a record number of poll workers, absentee ballots mailed out, and visitors and hits to our web site.

## ***NEW VOTING MACHINES***

New York State finally approved some new voting systems for sale, though none had, or have, passed certification. But a Federal Court Order directed us to place a ballot marking device (BMD) in each poll site, thus we were required to purchase appropriate machines.

A BMD allows a voter with disabilities to prepare a paper ballot in privacy. Audio Tactile Interfaces allow voters with various challenges to complete their ballot by themselves, in privacy. Voters can listen to their options over headphones, or look at an LCD screen with an image of the ballot that can be adjusted for size and contrast. "Sip and Puff" devices may also be used by voters who wish to do so.

Once the voter has completed his or her choices, the ballot is printed out and deposited in the ballot box.

After much research and careful consideration, the Commissioners decided to purchase 45 ImageCast voting machines manufactured by Sequoia. (Almost all counties in NY State ultimately decided on the same vendor.) The machines cost \$11,500 each for a total cost of \$517,750. Federal funds paid for 95% of the cost.

One of the reasons the Commissioners chose the ImageCast is that this machine also came with an optical scanner component (disabled for 2008 elections) that could be used as our HAVA compliant voting machine in 2009. However, questions remain about whether these machines will actually be certified in time to use in 2009 elections. (See last section, "Looking Ahead.")

A total of 22 voters used a BMD for the General Election. There were a few minor problems with the operation of the machines. Also, some voters complained that it was hard to hear the ballot through the provided headphones. Based on our experience in 2008, we plan to make appropriate changes to improve the voting experience with the BMD in 2009. We've often asked for input from the Fingerlakes Independence Center, and will work with them in 2009 to address concerns of voters with disabilities.

### ***NEW VOTING MACHINE MAINTENANCE FACILITY***

The new voting machines required more stringent storage and security conditions than could be met at our old site, the old county library. So in September, after months of searching, we leased a building at 1771 Hanshaw Road. So far we're quite pleased with the facility. The technicians now have clean, well-lighted work areas, plenty of electrical outlets, and the space to hold large group trainings.

Until we receive official notice from the State that we can retire the old lever machines, we'll continue to store and work on them in the old library. But at some point we'll be able to give that area back to the county records division, who desperately need the space.

### ***POLL SITE CONSOLIDATION***

In an effort to hold down costs and increase efficiency, we consolidated a number of poll sites. This resulted in significant savings, allowing us to purchase fewer new voting machines and supplies, and also save on election worker costs. Each poll site removed saved us about \$15,000 in equipment costs, and thousands per year for ongoing costs. The changes are:

#### **Town of Dryden**

- Districts 6 (previously Dryden Village Hall) and 11 (previously Dryden Baptist Chapel) are now combined with Dryden 3 and 7, and all vote at the Dryden Fire Station, 26 North St.

#### **Town of Ithaca**

- District 7 (previously Cayuga Heights Fire Station) is now combined with 6, voting at BOCES, 555 Warren Rd.

- Districts 8 (previously Cayuga Heights Fire Station) and 9 (previously Boynton Middle School) now both vote at the First Congregational Church, 309 Highland Rd.
- District 13 (previously Hospicare) is combined with 3 and 10, all voting at the College Circle Community Center, 1033 Danby Rd.

### **Town of Lansing**

- District 1 (previously Lansing Central Fire Station) combines with 3, voting at the Lansing Town Hall, 29 Auburn Rd.
- District 6 (previously Oakcrest Fire Station) will now vote at the Lansing Village Hall, 2405 N. Triphammer Rd.
- District 7 (previously (Bill Cooke/Maguire Cadillac) is combined with District 5 at the Crash Fire and Rescue Building, 72 Brown Rd.

### **Town of Ulysses**

- District 1 (previously Ulysses Town Hall) combines with District 3 at the Trumansburg Fire Station, 74 West Main Street , Trumansburg NY.

## ***ELECTIONS***

In 2008 we had a Presidential Primary on February 5. March 18 there were Village Elections in Cayuga Heights, Dryden, Groton, and Trumansburg. April 22 saw a Lansing Village and a Special Legislative District 12 election. September 9 Primaries were held in Enfield and Ulysses. And of course, the General Election was held November 4. We also helped quite a few school boards and fire districts with their elections, providing voter lists, poll books, and support as requested.

More people voted in the 2008 General Election in Tompkins County than in any previous election. Out of 54,394 active registered voters, 42,811 voted, for a turn out of 78.7%.

A record number of voters requested absentee ballots for the General Election. 4,230 were issued, and 3,765 were returned. In that total, 127 military ballots were mailed, and 84 returned. 576 ballots were sent to US citizens living overseas, and 506 were returned.

Less affidavit ballots (746) were issued than in the previous two Presidential elections. This may be because the recently enacted statewide voter database (NYSVoter) helps local boards keep more accurate registration records, and also because Tompkins County had a special voter outreach mailing before the election that helped identify problems. (See next section.)

This General Election also marked the countywide roll out of a new ballot marking device (BMD) for voters with disabilities. Every poll site had at least one BMD. A total 22 voters decided to use this machine.

As always, Commissioners Cree and DeWitt sat in our conference room surrounded by candidates and attorneys as they counted votes for all races, some of which were very close. The 2008 Cayuga Heights' mayoral race, which ended up in court over three ballots, was ultimately decided by just one vote. Over the last five years we've had six local elections decided by three or less votes, underscoring the fact that every vote does indeed count.

### ***VOTER EDUCATION GRANT***

A New York State voter education grant of \$11,736 came in quite handy this year for informing voters about the new Ballot Marking Devices (BMD). This was the first time we've had funding to do a countywide informational mailing, beyond the mandated annual Mail Check. Utilizing the grant funds, we mailed a voter educational postcard to all voters in Tompkins County three weeks prior to the General Election. We developed and mailed the cards through National Time Sharing Data Inc. (NTS), our voter database vendor. We included information regarding our extended office hours, new poll sites, and reminded voters that we would have a Ballot Marking Device at each poll site. We mentioned we had extensive information on our web site about the operation of the new BMD.

Many voters called us immediately after receiving their cards to obtain more information on absentee balloting or to ask other questions. We found that sending voter information so close to the election significantly cut down on Election Day phone inquiries. This allowed our phone lines to remain open for voter problems and emergencies. We believe this mailing helped increase voter turnout.

Another benefit from the card was an added line saying "Please bring this card to your polling site for faster processing." Often inspectors have a hard time hearing at some of the busier poll sites. When a voter hands the inspector a voter card, the inspector can easily look up the name without misinterpreting the information, avoiding mistakes and delays.

Unfortunately, we do not have the funding to continue this outreach effort in 2009.

## **WEB SITE**

Our website, votetompkins.com, run in-house by Deputy Tom Paolangeli, received more use than ever in 2008. We had a record number of yearly visitors, 33,424, an increase of 42% over 2007. They generated 675,550 hits, a 54% increase. We averaged 2785 visitors a month, with a peak of 6,418 in November. We had 1,595 visitors the day before the general election, and 1,868 the day of. Most of these visitors were either looking for poll site information or viewing sample ballots. We also saw large spikes in October near the registration cutoff date. Most of those visitors were downloading registration forms.

The increased use of the web site pays off in many ways: less phone calls to process in our office, less expense for mailing forms and info, and better customer service for voters. Being able to instantly download a form, especially near cut-off dates, can make the difference between being able to vote or not.

Although most people using our website throughout the year are located in Tompkins County, our web stats tracked visitors from 88 different countries. We assume most international visitors are military or federal absentee voters seeking information and downloadable absentee applications.

Many other counties in New York have asked (and received) our permission to use templates from our website to enhance their own.

## **“AWARD WINNING” STAFF**

In 2008 Patricia Fanders was appointed Deputy Republican Commissioner, replacing Krystal Hastings who stepped down for health reasons. Other full time staff remained the same: Commissioners Elizabeth Cree and Stephen DeWitt, Democratic Deputy Tom Paolangeli, and Senior Clerks Jennifer Terpening (R) and Laura Owens (D). We also utilized a lot of temporary staff to help in the office and at the machine facility, especially in the run up to the November election.

Jennifer Terpening developed a troubleshooting flow chart for election inspectors to use at the polls. Our inspectors liked it so much we had Jennifer present it at a “Best Practices” session at the State Board meeting, for which we received an award. Many other counties now use her flow chart, and continue to send their compliments.

We were also pleased to see Laura Owens receive an acknowledgement in a book on local history. The author appreciated Laura’s assistance in researching the history of voting in Tompkins County.

The Commissioners would like to publicly note their gratitude to the staff, technicians and inspectors for going above and beyond the call of duty in 2008, as we dealt with court orders and new voting systems and record numbers of voters.

## ***LOOKING AHEAD***

As of this writing, we're not sure exactly what to expect in 2009. We are supposed to be retiring the old mechanical voting machines and implementing the new optical scan system, but questions remain as to whether the new machines will be certified in time to allow this. The testing lab, SysTest, lost their federal certification in November, but expects to be recertified in February. What happens next will depend on federal and state directives.

So we're trying to plan for two scenarios. We may indeed start using the new machines, which will involve a massive voter, inspector, and technician training effort, or we may do the same as we did in 2008, where we deployed both the old mechanical lever machines as well as a Ballot Marking Device in each poll site.

A lot of local offices are up for election in 2009, so we do know we'll be extremely busy, regardless. We are very concerned about having enough time and resources to train voters, techs and inspectors if we do implement the Plan A machine in 2009. But as always, we will strive to provide exemplary service to all candidates and voters, and conduct efficient, accurate and transparent elections.

## ***BY THE NUMBERS***

At the end of 2008 we had 52,553 Active voters, an increase of 4786 voters over 2007. We typically have a big increase in registrations in a Presidential year.

We ended the year with 5,671 Inactive voters, which is a decrease of 6578 from 2007. (Voters become Inactive when we send them a mailing and it comes back marked that the person no longer lives there, and we either don't have a forwarding address or the person fails to respond to mail to their new address). Our county typically has a higher number of Inactives compared to other comparably-sized counties, due to the transient nature of our large student population.

The large decrease in Inactives is likely due to all NY counties finally using the statewide database, which allows us to more easily find and remove duplicate registrations. This resulted in a record number of registrations cancelled, 8615, many of whom were Inactive at the time. Going forward, this means our local

database is a much more accurate representation of actual voters in Tompkins County.

### **Voter Database:**

Active Voters	52,553
Inactive Voters	5,671
New Registrations Processed	7,564
In County Address Changes	5,408
Enrollment Changes	1,368
Name Changes	1,073
Registrations Cancelled	8,615

### **Inspectors:**

Inspectors Appointed & Trained	496
Classes Held (20 per class)	37 *

(\* The most training classes ever held in one year, and we were literally writing training manuals for the new BMDs at the same time!)

### **Mailcheck:**

(Used to verify voter's residence and mailing address, notify them of election dates and their polling site, and recruit inspectors.)

Mailed out	47,747
Returned	4,096

### **Absentee Ballots Out:**

Feb. Presidential Primary	1,431
Sept. Primary	11
Nov. General	4,230

### **Petitions Received:**

Designating	13
Independent	5